

English have always had a passion for being improved;
 as with *The Pilgrim's Progress*, as with *The Testament of Beauty* in our own day, they rushed to read this *Vision of Piers Plowman*, where all classes and conditions of men could find their own faces and their own faults pictured, as in a rough-cut, unflattering looking-glass; or rather, perhaps, as in some turbid river, tortuous in its windings, lapping monotonously down long shoals of mud, yet imaging in its grey waters all the coloured life of earth upon its banks and, overhead, the eternal clouds of Heaven, on which the Son of Man seems ever about to appear; though meanwhile across their troubled reflections here below drifts at indolent intervals only an empty botde or a drowned rat. For no author could be more unconscious of the incongruous, more indifferent about mixing the gross and the sublime. He is a preacher, not an artist; he is concerned to be, not pretty, but wide as the world—a sun of righteousness shining alike on diadem and dunghill. His very prologue embraces in its sweep Heaven, Earth, and Hell. Where Satan on the mountain showed Christ the kingdoms only of this world, and Dante visited only in succession his Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise, this dreamer on Malvern Hills (borrowing a hint perhaps from the staging of the Mysteries) sees afi three at once, the Tower of Heaven above him, the

dungeon of Hell in a 'merke dale* beneath,
and before
him, as it were at the foot of the
Herefordshire Beacon,
the field of Earth, with its vast fair of
vanities* There
eddy ia one black whirlpool together the
workers of
the world, that 'pleyed ful selde*, and the
rich that
exploit them; brewers and beggars;
merchants and
minstrels; false friars and cheating pHgrims;
grave lawyers
and vagabond jesters; noble knights and
cook-boys
calling: